Gender-Neutral English in the Indian Classroom

By Abha Prakash Leard

"The proper study of mankind is man."
-Alexander Pope

While the dynamic poetry of the 17th century neoclassical English poet continues to engage readers and scholars alike, the above poetic statement has been cited not only as an example of Pope's (probably unintentional) male chauvinism, but also as being reflective of the pervasive gender bias within the English language itself. The use of generic terms such as mankind and man is now associated with sexism and avoided by most careful speakers and writers of English.

In India, however, gendered English is still in use among many English-speaking people, whether they are government officials, students, or even, teachers in English-medium educational institutions. It is a special responsibility of teachers of English everywhere to make their students aware of the implications of gender biases in the English language and to help them to use English in a manner that is inclusive of both sexes. My objective in this article is to address this need for teaching gender-neutral English in the Indian context, and to share the mixed responses of my undergraduate science students in a Functional English course.

The needs and conditions of the modern English-speaking world have steered English toward becoming the most effective and sensitive international medium of communication. We have increasingly moved away not only from standard techniques of teaching and learning English but also from standard English itself. For instance, the need to purge English of Eurocentric biases was recognized and dealt with in most of the former colonies of Britain, including, of course, the United States and Canada. In India the prescribed textbooks of English in schools and colleges are no longer mere imitations of British and American textbooks but are modified versions suitable to Indian social and cultural realities. The amazing versatility of English has been proved in many different contexts. But, despite this openness and adaptability of the English language to new words, concepts, and usages, many speakers of English, male and female, in India and elsewhere, find it difficult to resist the language's male centeredness.

Language and Power

My intention in exposing my students to the merits of using a gender-neutral form of English went beyond the recent trend in Western academia on political correctness. Given India's history of sectarian tendencies and communal conflicts, as well as its caste/class distinctions and the traditional power imbalance between the sexes, I feel it is important for Indians who use English to avoid the stereotypical and often harmful images of people based on their regional origin, economic background, sex, and religious beliefs.

The power relations within the English language are revealed in its gender biases, the majority of which rest on the traditional sexual division of labor and on the cultural assumption of male superiority. Since language is both denotative and connotative, these gender biases imply and/or project constructions of women as unequal to men. Use of a gender-neutral form of English strives to correct these distorted assumptions and projections by making apparent the full participation of both sexes in all spheres of life. One of the main arguments against male-centered English in its usage is that discrimination against women is promoted through sexist language. In their essay, "One Small Step for Genkind," Miller and Swift (1992) offer several examples of sexism in language and the ways in which the English language reflects a sexist culture. According to the authors, sexist language is any language that expresses "stereotyped attitudes and expectations, or that assumes the inherent superiority of one sex over the other" (1992:220) The use of masculine pronouns for people in general, for example he in generalized usage, refers to either sex as described by Milla and Swift as an instance of a linguistic construction that "operates to keep women invisible" or secondary in status to men (1992:219).

In recognition of the power of language to subjugate groups of people, most reputed dictionaries and guides to writing in English published in the last 10 years discourage the use of words or statements that suggest bias or prejudice toward any group. More specialized books on style and composition such as the Modern Language Association's Handbook for Writers of Research Papers (1988) offer a list of reliable guides to writing in nonsexist language. The MLA Handbook, for example, gives its own clear guideline of what constitutes sexually discriminatory language and its reasonable alternative:

•Conscientious writers no longer use he to refer to someone of unspecified sex, such as a doctor or an executive, lest readers infer that the term can refer only to a man. To avoid this use of he, they recast sentences into the plural, specify the sex of an individual under discussion, and occasionally, if all else fails, use he or she or him or her.

•Careful writers also avoid designating sex with suffixes like -man and -ess and substitute nonsexist terms (1988:34).

English for Humankind: Indian Responses

My students belong mainly to Tamil Nadu, a fairly conservative state in South India. Their initial reactions to revising gendered English into a more inclusive form ranged from amused puzzlement on the one hand to a hostile unwillingness toward adopting a "feminist," and therefore suspect, linguistic trend on the other. These varied forms of resistance were easy to understand, given the students' previous lack of exposure to this new concept and their traditional sociocultural backgrounds. Interestingly enough, with the exception of two girls who expressed interest and concern in the way language can marginalize one half of humanity, the rest of the female students refused to see any merit in revising male-centered English. Hesitant perhaps of engaging in gender issues, these intelligent but self-conscious students perceived the gender bias in English as nothing more than a harmless linguistic convention.

It is likely that attention to the subtleties of language is unnecessary in science disciplines in which language is a tool that makes possible the objective documentation and analysis of various phenomena. In the humanities, however, especially literature, language is more than just a tool. It is a living, multitalent system of symbols, assumptions, and associations.

Keeping this difference in mind, I avoided going into the complexities of the language process. Since I was teaching a first-year university composition and introduction to literature course, I concentrated on making the students aware of the common instances of gender bias in English. While doing exercises in grammar or comprehension of short prose lessons, I pointed out the pervasive use of masculine pronouns that stood for either sex and explained the cultural and social implications of such usage. Some examples:

1. Each student will be given a diary for his use.

2. Every student must register his name with the teacher 30 minutes before the exam.

3. The headmasters of all the city schools met to discuss the recent crisis.

4. All the doctors and their wives were invited to the event.

The above sentences imply that students, heads of schools, and doctors are male. This distortion of reality can be corrected by the use of gender-free substitutes such as principals or heads in place of headmasters, and spouses instead of wives. By recasting sentences one and two into the plural form, their male-centeredness is transformed into gender neutrality.

Discussing the use of gender-free substitutes for other male-oriented terms that are still used in present-day India, we agreed on the following list:

Gendered	*Gender-Free*
postman	postal agent
chairman	chairperson
landlord	landowner
manmade	synthetic
poetess	poet
air hostess	flight attendant
policeman	police officer
maid	domestic

The Indian cultural context

One student correctly pointed out that India was referred to as motherland — what about sexism in this case? In cultural historiography, India is seen as feminine, usually as a mother figure. Gandhi, during the struggle for freedom, urged Indians to rescue their mother who was enslaved by the British. A Sanskrit word such as *matrebhumi* which means mother earth or the land of the mother signifies the feminine associations around the image of lndia. Clearly, this gendering of the nation can be avoided by using the term homeland instead of either fatherland or motherland.

Conclusion

For those who believe that language and culture are interrelated, that language embodies and disseminates cultural assumptions and relations of power, the first step toward transforming a biased society may be to transform the language itself. This was the response of at least some of my students. Asked to give their views on the "Merits and Demerits of Gender-Neutral English," toward the end of the semester, 60 percent were in favor of a degendered language. Some of the responses dealt with the difficulty of changing language usage and with the possible confusion that would result if a new usage was brought into effect. A few students felt that since conventions are so deeply ingrained, usage is unconscious "if the user is not intentionally discriminating against a particular sex then there is nothing to be perturbed about." On the more positive side, the responses called for a language in tune with the changing times and a language that, "if used sincerely, could bring about an ideal society for both men and women."

Note: I wish to thank the students who took the course on Functional English (1996–97), Pondicherry University, for providing their responses to the issue discussed in the above article.

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